It’s been said that happiness is good health and a bad memory, so why are we so worried about our memory?

Few people really understand how memory works, but we do know that without it we no longer feel ourselves. It’s as though we are the sum of all that we have experienced and know; our memory holds the keys.

Memory is far more than “…the diary we carry with us” (Oscar Wilde). Memory is complex and extraordinary, the key to our sense of ‘who we are’. And the promising new science of brain plasticity reveals that it is never too late to improve brain and memory function.

By caring for ourselves, it is possible to preserve – even improve – our memory.

Types of memory
There are two types of memory; short term (working memory) and long term (enduring memory).

Our enduring memory is like many filing cabinets with different labels. Stored memory allows us to recognise previously assimilated information and build on it. Without it, we would be starting from scratch every time, making learning and functioning very difficult.

Memory distractors
Many things can divide our attention, but when addressed can improve our memory.

Chronic pain, hormonal changes, depression, anxiety, stress, heavy workloads and medications can all interfere with memory making and recall.

There are also particular stages in a woman’s life where memory may be more challenged, such as pregnancy and the months following having a baby, menopause and as we enter older age.

Having a baby
After giving birth, it seems that even reading a shopping catalogue can be a challenge! Jean Hailes endocrinologist Dr Sonia Davison says that hormones change significantly during pregnancy and breastfeeding.
“Memory challenges after delivery are probably due to the combination of hormonal changes, stress due to the constant attention a new baby needs, sleep deprivation and recovery of the body from its pregnant state,” she says.

Memory at midlife

There is much interest in the effects of low oestrogen levels and brain function. Mental function seems to be affected around the time of perimenopause – the years leading up to menopause.

The effects of menopause on memory loss are possibly related to the often erratic changes of hormone levels, causing symptoms such as hot flushes, night sweats and mood instability. Night sweats, in particular, cause sleep interruption, which can reduce memory function.

Some women report improved memory and concentration from taking hormone replacement therapy, perhaps through improved sleep due to reduced night sweats.
An association exists between the hormone testosterone and brain function.

Testosterone levels fall with age in women from their 20s. In postmenopausal women, testosterone levels hit a low at 65 years, which is the age the incidence of Alzheimer’s begins to rise.

Sonia’s research found that testosterone improved memory. Women in the trial were healthy and taking hormone replacement therapy (via a skin patch) and had their testosterone levels restored to the level of women in their 20s, for a period of six months.

Results showed that the women taking testosterone had significant improvement in verbal learning and memory, compared to those taking no treatment. A larger trial to compare the effects of testosterone versus placebo treatment in women who were not taking hormone replacement therapy showed similar improvements in verbal learning and memory.

Memory research
A ground-breaking five year international collaborative study called ASPREE (ASPIrin in Reducing Events in the Elderly) is currently researching how we may prevent age-related brain deterioration.

The study is recruiting 19,000 healthy people over the age of 70; 50% are taking low dose aspirin and the other half a placebo.

This study will provide critical information on the effects of aspirin on brain function and the role of lifestyle in preserving brain function.
Largely funded by peak research funding bodies in the US (NIH) and Australia (NHMRC), ASPREE will also shed light on whether aspirin can reduce the onset of Alzheimer’s disease.

The Australian head of the study and Head of the School of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine, Alfred Health, Monash University Professor John McNeil, says aspirin has the potential to extend the duration of the healthy active life of older people by delaying the onset of cardiovascular disease, stroke and possibly dementia. “This is one of the most important and largest studies ever undertaken on brain function and ageing,” says John, “and will provide ground breaking information on many aspects of optimising brain function in the ageing population.”

How to look after your memory

Sonia says that while there is a normal age-related decline, much can be done to improve or maintain memory and brain function.

Remaining as healthy as possible helps the circulation to the brain, preventing problems such as small bleeds and low level inflammation. This can be achieved with regular exercise and a healthy diet including green leafy vegetables, by not smoking and keeping our alcohol intake low.

It’s also important to keep blood pressure and blood glucose levels under control, treat depression, have interests or hobbies, stay connected to others and challenge the brain through activities.

**Activities that improve memory**

According to Canadian psychiatrist Norman Diode, author of *The Brain That Changes Itself*, some activities are better at lowering our risk of conditions such as dementia.

Activities that involve concentration, such as studying a musical instrument, playing board games, doing puzzles and reading, are helpful. Activities that are physically and mentally challenging, such as dancing or juggling are also good for preserving memory and brain function.

Less intense activities such as bowling, babysitting and golfing are great activities for general health, but won’t help to improve memory.

**Mindfulness**

We know that memory is a result of taking time to fully focus, so activities that increase our ability to focus are helpful.

Mindfulness is a practice that reduces mind wandering and distraction, allowing us to fully engage in whatever we are doing.

Dr Craig Hassed, a leading expert in the art of mindfulness, says that when people are not paying attention, they often subconsciously imagine problems that don’t exist. If the brain is not engaged in purposeful activities it ‘gets up to mischief’ – and this takes a toll on both mental and physical health.

Mindfulness training stabilises the brain and helps memory by regulating attention and assists the working memory.

**Striving for a memory friendly society**

Anne Unkenstein, Melbourne-based neuropsychologist specialising in memory, says “So bombarded are we by media stories of memory loss and dementia, we’ve developed a heightened sensitivity to signs of memory decline.”

Many of us are quick to find fault with our memory, claiming ‘my memory isn’t what it used to be’. However, memory function is a result of many factors. By understanding better what helps or harms our memories, by resisting the urge to point to our own memory lapses or to the memory lapses of those around us, we may become a more ‘memory friendly’ society.

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**Tips to help memory**

- Reduce distractions – turn down (or off) the radio/TV
- Repeat (out loud) and rehearse (in our heads) new information
- Associate new information with something already known
- Rhymes help to imprint memory – just as you learnt your times tables
- If possible add a smell, taste, colour to the memory
- Grouping information can help recall
- Draw pictures or make up silly sentences to remember key words
- Use diaries, calendars, computers and reminder apps on your phone to store dates and events

**Resource**

*Remembering well: how memory works and what to do when it doesn’t* by Delys Sargeant and Anne Unkenstein. Available through book shops and online, RRP $27.95.

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